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# The Dead Line.

By GIDEON LAINE, D. D.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## A CONVERSATION CONCERNING CRIMINALS.

Government, ordained by God to defend the weak against the strong, to exalt right above might, has, up to this time, been the great wrong-doer. Its crimes throw those of private men into the shade.

—W. E. CHANNING, D. D.

Our distrust is very expensive. The money we spend for courts and prisons is very ill laid out. We make, by our distrust, the thief, and burglar, and incendiary, and by our court and jail we keep him so.

—EMERSON.

Mason had written John Cotterell the night after Kate's first visit as reporter for the News, and had told of the trouble in the church and suggested its possible outcome. Kate mailed her brother marked copies of the News containing Mason's sermon. Upon receiving these, the blacksmith had called on Mrs. Delorme and exhibited to her the letter and the sermon; and thereupon Mrs. Delorme had written Mason, requesting information as to his lineage, and as to the present whereabouts of his father, if his name was Marshall, and had signed herself "Hallie Mason Delorme." Mason replied in detail, and stated that his father had been dead for many years; whereupon Mrs. Delorme wrote again, calling Mason her nephew, and informing him that his grandfather had in his last days relented, and in his will had left a large legacy to his son Marshall, who was Mason's father, or to the child or children of said Marshall if he should be dead; that being unable to learn anything concerning the legatee, the executors had invested the money, and that it must now amount to a very snug fortune, for the grandfather had been dead more than ten years. The letter gave the addresses of the executors, and advised Mason to write to them; and expressed the hope that should he find it convenient to come, Mrs. Delorme might shortly enjoy a visit from her newly-found relative. Mason wrote to the executors, and they confirmed what Mrs. Delorme had written him, enclosed a copy of the will for his information and guidance, and expressed a wish to pay over the legacy as soon as possible and wind up the estate, the only thing required being that he should produce to the proper court in Virginia legal proof of his father's death. Harbison being out of town, Mason took the letters and documents he had received to Judge Bolder and desired that gentleman's advice. Judge Bolder read Mrs. Delorme's first letter in a business-like way, but, coming at last to the signature—"Hallie Mason Delorme"—he started.

"Why, Mr. Mason," he exclaimed, "I knew your grandfather; and, in her girlhood days, your aunt and I were warm friends. The old gentleman was very harsh to your father for having taken into his head the unaccountable notion of choosing a wife for himself; but I think you will agree that your father made a very wise choice nevertheless."

Mason heartily assented; and Judge Bolder, coming back to legal matters, suggested that Mrs. Mason's evidence would doubtless be accepted as sufficient proof of her husband's death. But Mason informed him that the matter could not be got through with so easily.

"My mother," said he, "absolutely refuses to swear that my father is dead, and protests that she does not believe that he is; although to everybody else the fact seems beyond doubt. It is of no use to reason with her; she will not give up the conviction that he is alive and will yet return. He was killed in a railroad accident, and his body was not brought home—was burned up in the wreck; but his watch was found in the debris and sent to us. That was more than a quarter of a century ago, when I was but a child; but my mother has never given up her belief, or rather, her confidence that my father will yet come to us alive."

Bolder, being a bachelor, remarked: "Well, if a woman won't, she won't; so we must look elsewhere for our evidence. Other people where you then lived doubtless know of the circumstances and of your father's protracted absence since. An unexplained absence of seven years raises a legal presumption of death, and that will be enough in this case. Write to some of those who knew your father and knew of his failure to return, the rumor that he had been killed in a railroad accident, and so on, and ask if they will give their depositions as to the facts."

Mason wrote Mrs. Delorme that Judge Bolder had known her when she was a girl. He also wrote to several persons whose names were given him by his mother, and requested their depositions as to his father's death; for his financial condition was growing desperate. One day he returned from the postoffice greatly excited, and hurriedly handing his mother a letter exclaimed:

"Mother, you are right. Read that."

It was a letter from an old man who had once been postmaster in the village where Mrs. Mason had lived.

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Next day, Sunday, Grace Alden and Kate Cotterell dined with Mrs. Mason and her son, who expected to leave next day and go in search of employment. In the afternoon, Grace picked up from the lounge a pamphlet which Mason had been reading that morning—Ingersoll's lecture on "Crimes Against Criminals."

"Do you read Ingersoll, Mr. Mason?" asked she in astonishment.

"I read anything that is good, Miss Alden," replied Mason. "The man who will not read the other side confesses conscious doubt of his own. Colonel Ingersoll's ideas have made a great stir in the world, and dealing as they do, mostly with theology, it seems to me that clergymen, more than any other people, are bound to know what those ideas are. And from whom are we to learn those ideas if not from Colonel Ingersoll himself? I heed the old lines:

Seize upon truth, where'er 'tis found,  
Among your friends, among your foes,  
On Christian or on heathen ground.  
The flower's divine where'er it grows,  
Neglect the prickles, and assume the rose.

"Besides, this particular lecture does not deal with theology, but with our treatment of those unfortunates whom we pharisees call criminals, because we have not been caught. When I see a man on trial for crime, I feel somewhat as Wesley did, when, on seeing a poor wretch led out to be hanged, the great preacher exclaimed—'There goes my other self!' You have read 'Les Miserables,' I presume, Miss Alden?"

"Yes, sir, and I continue to read it. If the character of Jean Valjean drawn there by Victor Hugo be at all true to human nature, it seems to me there must be better men among criminals than among almost any other class. Do you believe it possible that so noble a nature could lie dormant in an ex-convict? Do policemen really make men hardened criminals by persecution as indicated by Hugo? Are there really such characters as Javert among our policemen?"

"Yes, to each of your questions, Miss Alden. Not long ago a man in Chicago went to a magistrate and asked protection from just such persecution. He had been convicted of some offense, served out his sentence and returned to Chicago and was trying to live an honest life, but whenever he succeeded in finding employment a policeman would come around and the man would soon after be discharged. He complained that the police were making it impossible for him to earn an honest living. Of course I do not think all criminals are good men, any more than I think all men outside the prisons are good, but I do believe there is many a good man, valuable to society, who has sometime done something for which he

could have been sent to prison, and not having been found out, or not having been prosecuted nor disgraced by exposure, his repentance of that act was the turning point in his career. Had he been sent to prison and disgraced, he might have become a hardened wretch. Then, too, I believe there are men in prison for what the law makes a crime, but which, looked at in its true light, was a virtuous act prompted by the noblest impulses. I do not think it could happen in Kansas, but in large cities, where, as a rule, the community knows nothing of the tragedies acted in the criminal courts, I have no doubt men are sometimes buried in prisons for years for doing manly deeds; as, for instance, protecting feeble men or defenseless children against the brutal conduct of half-drunken officers making needless arrests for trivial offenses or no offenses at all. From what I know of the police of Chicago and of New York, I have no doubt that a deliberate police conspiracy is sometimes formed to punish a real hero for that most heinous of crimes in the eyes of the force—'resisting an officer.'"

"I know of just such a case," exclaimed Kate. "I shall not reveal the gentleman's name, for you might meet him sometime, and his story was confided to me as a sacred secret. If there is a good man in the world he is one; yet he is an ex-convict. About two years ago an old gentleman was badly hurt in a runaway accident at Cobden, and for some weeks I helped take care of him. One day he abruptly told me he was an ex-convict; that he had spent twenty-two years in Sing Sing, and was released only three years before coming to Cobden, and he seemed astonished that I did not become frightened and run away when he made this startling announcement. But I told him I was sure he had not been in prison for any wickedness he had done; that there must have been some mistake, and he told me his story.

"Early in the war, he left his wife and baby boy with his father-in-law and had enlisted in the army. At the close of the war he was in New York on his way home, having already written his wife to expect him, when he saw an Irish policeman trying to tear a little girl from the arms of a poor woman who was protecting the child. The policeman had struck the woman with his club and had, with the same blow, cut a gash in the little girl's scalp, and as he was about to savagely strike the woman over the head, my friend drew a pistol and ordered him to desist. The officer was drawing his weapon when my friend fired and killed the brute. A trial followed, before an Irish judge and a jury selected by an Irish bailiff, resulting in the sentencing of the woman to twenty years in prison and the sentencing of my friend to death. Some comrades got his sentence commuted to life imprisonment, and he was pardoned at last only three years before I met him. When he gave up hope, he handed his money, his watch and a letter to a comrade homeward bound requesting him to deliver them to the waiting wife."

Mason and his mother started at this allusion to the watch, and sat open mouthed, unable to say a word.

"Not hearing from home, he believed the news of his fate had killed his wife, but after his release from prison he learned that the train upon which his comrade was traveling homeward had been wrecked; that the watch had been found in the debris of a burned car and the railroad company had sent it to his wife with the statement that her husband had been burned up in the wreck."

"Oh, Marshall!" exclaimed Mrs. Mason. Kate did not comprehend Mrs. Mason's agitation, and proceeded:

"He hastened to his father-in-law's home in Wisconsin to find it occupied by strangers. There were no new graves in the family graveyard and it showed signs of years of neglect. Finally, he met an old acquaintance—a former postmaster of the village, and learned from him that wife and child had gone to Oregon and from there to some town in New Mexico, the name of which the old postmaster could not remember, but my friend also learned that his wife had not believed he was dead and that when she had moved to Oregon she had left word for him where to find her there. He went to New Mexico, and having accidentally discovered a valuable mine and sold it for a large sum, started out to find his

family—traveling everywhere, and he was in Cobden on one of his journeys when he was hurt."

During the latter part of Kate's story Mrs. Mason put her hands to her beating heart. Mason went and sat by her side. But now the "sweet-faced old lady" could restrain herself no longer. Springing up she seized Kate and embraced her, crying out while tears flowed:

"Oh, you darling girl, you have seen my husband! Marshall, did I not always say so? Oh, you darling girl! He will come to us at last!" And much more. When his mother's paroxysm had somewhat subsided, though she still held Kate as if fearful of losing this one chance of again meeting her husband, Mason said:

"You may as well tell us all of it now, Miss Cotterell. Pray, what is his name?"

"It is not Mason, and I do not think I should tell it."

"Not Mason?" exclaimed Mrs. Mason in dismay. "Oh, how cruel if I am to be disappointed at last! Tell me his Christian name at least. I implore you do that much. None of us will ever reveal it."

"Well, now, that is strange, too," said Kate reflectively, as a suspicion occurred to her for the first time. "What was your husband's name, Mrs. Mason? His full name?"

"Marshall Overton Mason."

"That explains it! My friend's name, at least the name by which he is known to me, is Marshall Overton—Mr. Overton."

"Oh, it is he, you dear girl!" exclaimed Mrs. Mason again embracing Kate. "He has simply dropped his surname. Oh, where is he?"

"I have not heard of him since last September, when I received a letter from him stating that he was on his way to the Topolobampo colony in Sinaloa, Mexico, where he had a faint hope of finding his family; and telling me not to write him, as, in case he did not find his family, he meant to travel awhile through regions where letters would not reach him. I expect him here almost any time now. He has been like another father to me."

Then Kate thought of something and blushed. I suppose it was something with regard to having Overton for another father.

"I have always said he would come back to us. God is good! Oh, think of it. I am going to see my dear Marshall again after all these years!"

"But remember, Mrs. Mason, he is an ex-convict. I should not like to tell him to come, and then have you send him away broken hearted after his long search. Mr. Mason is a preacher, and he might not like to publicly acknowledge an ex-convict as his father. Pardon me, but I must know it will make no difference with either of you."

"Scorn my father because he has been persecuted? If he had been a real criminal my father would find recognition and a son's warm welcome awaiting him. Do you really think so ill of me?"

"No, I do not; and Mrs. Mason need not answer my foolish question."

Mrs. Mason was trembling from the excitement of the past few minutes, and was persuaded to lie down on the lounge, while Mason told the story of his futile efforts to get his father's legacy, finally producing for Kate to read the ex-postmaster's letter, which now put Overton's identity beyond doubt.

The bell rang, and through some impulse Kate went to the door. Overton and Harbison entered. Kate gave her "other father" a hearty greeting in the hall, calling him "Mr. Mason," which puzzled him.

"Did you find your family, Mr. Mason?" she asked in a low tone.

"No, Kate, nor any trace of them."

"Well, I have been more fortunate," said Kate as she smiled mischievously.

"Kate!"

"Yes, I have found your family," said she, still speaking in a low tone, "and I am quite well acquainted with them."

"Here, in Risington?"

"Here in this house. I have just been telling them your story. They know all, and no explanation will be necessary."

"Kate, you have too good a heart to jest with me about this!"

"Come and see your wife and son, and judge whether I jest."